



Fire Learning Network Notes from the Field

Prescribed Fire Training Exchange—March, 2013

Niobrara Valley, Nebraska

It started with snow, it ended with snow, and in between we burned 4,200 acres of forest and grasslands along the Niobrara River in north-central Nebraska. Arriving in the middle of a blizzard late on the night of March 9, University of Idaho students were met by a search party that was patrolling the roads looking for wayward firefighters who may have become stuck in snowdrifts on roads where there was little vehicle traffic and even less cell phone coverage. While



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the Idaho students fared fine, on the southerly route, a crew coming from New Mexico had to leave their car in Johnstown and hitch a ride with the incident commander. It was a heck of a way to start a training event that promised to deliver thousands of acres of controlled burning and integrate professional wildland fire practitioners and students from five universities.

For the past five years The Nature Conservancy and federal, state and private organizations have been building a new kind of fire training, in which every participant is a student and each is a teacher. Even the most experienced firefighters still have much to learn, and those just starting have much to share. One thing we learned was that despite the winter weather, the sun and wind would soon clear off the snow and allow the vegetation to burn.

The area along the Niobrara River just east of Valentine, Nebraska, suffered large wildfires in July 2012, and the neighbors and communities were still reeling from the blackened acres, the loss of forage for their animals and the homes that burned. The wildfire had a silver lining, though: burning next to a burned area can provide a great anchor point and really limit the potential for escape. While the crews of students, local landowners, federal and state agencies, municipal fire departments, private contractors and non-profit organizations worked to apply “good fire”—the rejuvenating burns these grasslands need—neighbors came to visit and discuss the value of controlled burns. Some arrived upset, but after talking, most recognized the importance of lessen-

ing the danger to their community by burning during the right weather conditions and when there were plenty of firefighters on hand.

Building support for “good fire” is important. A good fire is one that meets pre-planned objectives to either restore or maintain “fire adapted ecosystems”—natural areas that have a historic dependence on fire. Some members of the local community, including volunteer firefighters, came and watched from safe vantage points. Others had completed training that allowed them to integrate fully with the professional wildland firefighters. On numerous occasions, the burn boss or crew leaders escorted media near the fire or gave radio and television interviews. We can’t succeed if we don’t include the wider community in our work, and letting the media participate helps us share our story with others.

In the two-week training, 65 participants worked long days without breaks, fighting freezing temperatures and strong winds, on a landscape with drought conditions in the forests and heavily grazed pastures that only carried fire under the best of conditions. They got vehicles stuck, broke equipment, went hungry and got sick. Despite these challenges, the resilient fire practitioners supported and encouraged each other and during many of the days were able to apply good fire. After two weeks of hard work, a celebratory moment came when the crews had lit a ridge just above the Niobrara River. A snake of fire six miles long glowed well into the night as prairie fire moved from the grass to dry pines and fire was restored to its natural place.

The Fire Learning Network and SPER are supported by *Promoting Ecosystem Resiliency through Collaboration: Landscapes, Learning and Restoration*, a cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more information about the FLN, contact Lynn Decker at ldecker@tnc.org or (801) 320-0524.

